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Making Nuclear Warheads at the Los Alamos National Laboratory

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Most people living in the great expanses of northern New Mexico appreciate seeing rainbows touch the ground from end to end. They know majestic wooded mountains, turquoise skies by day, and spangled skies by night rightly earn the State its official description—"The Land of Enchantment." Against this backdrop, it's a wonder New Mexico 's nuclear weapons industry hasn't caused the State to be renamed the " Land of Disenchantment ."

In 2008 the National Nuclear Safety Administration (NNSA), a part of the U.S. Department of Energy, held 20 public hearings in various locations in New Mexico on its proposed consolidation of the nation's nuclear weapons production complex. With the federal Environmental Protection Agency giving the agency's Environmental Impact Statement a pass—it rated an "LO," that is "Lack of Objections"—the NNSA was free to decide that the "manufacturing and research and development involving plutonium will remain at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico."

The National Nuclear Safety Administration says it is waiting to see the recommendations of the Obama administration's Nuclear Posture Review, a report on the nation's deterrence and strategy policy for the next ten years; but before the review is even released (March 1), the agency has proceeded with construction of the new Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building, which is almost complete. This building is part of the new Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement-Nuclear Facility at the Lab where plutonium "pits," the triggers for even bigger bombs, will be produced. Building the whole nuclear facility will total between $2 billion to $4 billion.

Just because plutonium comes from the re-processed waste of nuclear reactors is no reason why these costs should hide out in the budget of the Department of Energy and not in the Department of Defense where they belong.

And why should the NNSA wait and see anyway? In advance of his own administration's Nuclear Posture Review, President Obama himself has already asked Congress to give NNSA more than $7 billion for work related to nuclear weapons,

Just to get a handle on how much money $7 billion really is, it would take 11.5 days for a millions seconds to tick away, but 32 years to tick away a billion seconds.

President Obama and Russia 's President Medvedev are negotiating to reduce their deployed nuclear warheads down to numbers as low as between 1,500 and 1.675, but wouldn't the Lab's getting a 22% increase, the largest since the Manhattan Project, give

Medvedev a pause?

About the size of a softball, a plutonium pit itself has the explosive power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima . According to Jeff Berger, spokesman for LANL, the Lab manufactured 11 new plutonium pits in 2007, 7 in 2008, and 4 in 2009. How does producing pits jibe with the pledge to reduce nuclear weapons in the Non-Proliferation Treaty?

You might say that since 2001 the LANL scientists who make the pits have been "practicing," for the plan of the National Nuclear Safety Administration is for the Lab to make at least 20-80 pits a year. Also in advance of the current administration's Nuclear Posture Review, the NNSA already allows production at Los Alamos of up to 20 pits a year.

Fourteen thousand of these pits–made exclusively at Rocky Flats, CO, until the Department of Energy closed the plant for environmental violations almost twenty years ago–are stored in the Pantex plant in Amarillo , Texas . This total does not count the 5,250 nuclear weapons currently loaded to go in U.S. silos, submarines and planes, as reported by The Federation of American Scientists in a 2009 report, nor the 2,500 stored as spares, nor the 200 stored at six bases in five European countries in Europe for a grand total of 22,000 pits.

In his 2004 report on pit production for Congress, defense specialist at the Congressional Research Service, Jonathan Medalia explains why the U.S. needs new pits. With the U.S. moratorium (1992) on underground testing, when the U.S. removes the pit from a deployed nuclear weapon to evaluate its performance, extensive alternate testing can make the pit unusable. For example, he cited the shortage, created by testing, of replacement pits for the W88, a nuclear warhead used on the Trident II submarine-launched ballistic missile.

In 2007, the JASON Defense Advisory Group determined that the lifetime of a pit is "in excess of 100 years, as regards aging of plutonium." Why make new pits?

Either the 14,000 pits in storage at Pantex are deteriorating and useless, or they are good for 100 years. If they are deteriorating and useless, they should be dismantled. If they are good for 100 years, then don't make new ones.

In its Record of Decision to proceed with pit production at Los Alamos , NNSA claims that it "complies with the Clean Air Act." Yet a New Mexico environmental group, Amigos Bravos, along with nine other organizations and individuals filed a lawsuit in February 2008 against the U. S. Department of Energy as owner of the Lab and Los Alamos National Security, comprised of Bechtel National, BWX Technologies, the Washington Group International and the University of California, as manager and operator of the Lab, for violations of the Clean Water Act.

According to the Western Environmental Law Center that represents the plaintiffs, the lawsuit is presently pending settlement negotiations.

Also in its Record of Decision, NNSA claims that "its emissions are regulated by the New Mexico Environment Department." Indeed. On three different occasions last year, The New Mexico Environment Department fined the Lab for violations including (1) failing to install a groundwater monitoring network (2) failing to plug and abandon a groundwater monitoring well that is leaking contamination towards the regional aquifer and (3) spilling

approximately 4 million gallons of potable water over a 26-hour period that eroded soil and carried contaminants—plutonium among them—from a Solid Waste Management Unit into Los Alamos Canyon and beyond laboratory boundaries.

According to James Bearzi, Chief of the New Mexico Environment Department's Hazardous Waste Bureau, the Lab paid its fines of $2.5 million of taxpayers' money this past December and has to correct the violations. Commenting on the Lab's dysfunctional M.O., Bearzi wonders "why they don't do the right thing to begin with."

One of those commenting at the NNSA hearing in Los Alamos was Dr. David L. Clark, a nuclear scientist at the Lab, not surprisingly in favor of the new nuclear facility at Los Alamos, who wanted to demonstrate his care for the environment: "I led a small scientific team that went up to Rocky Flats," he said; "We personally got rid of 385 acres of military industrial complex. We removed 805 concrete structures. . .We remediated 98,000 tons of contaminated soils, and we stabilized, stored, packaged, and removed 26 tons of weapons usable plutonium from the Denver metropolitan area."

The irony of Clark 's accomplishments, of course, is that they reveal the extent of the contamination at Rocky Flats. While LANL would not be producing pits on the industrial scale of Rocky Flats, the contamination of Rocky Flats raises the question of why pit production at LANL would be any cleaner? In fact, according to a ten-year study of millions of Lab records as well as interviews with employees, past and present, the Los Alamos Document Retrieval and Assessment project under the auspices of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention determined that the Lab is not cleaner. In fact, just from the years 1948 to 1955, even not including other years, plutonium releases at the Lab exceeded those at Rocky Flats, Hanford and Savannah River nuclear plants combined. Because states don't have authority over federal agencies, the New Mexico Environment Department's hands are tied. It is prevented from regulating radioactive contamination at the Lab.

There are many scientists like Clark at Los Alamos who appreciate the spectacular beauty surrounding them, who love skiing, biking, camping, fishing and hiking in the mountains and canyons of "The Land of Enchantment." But their work supports the possibility of a burned world piled high in ash like a desolate scene out of Cormac McCarthy's The Road.

Replacing and stockpiling bombs that no one should ever use is insane. How can people who say they enjoy the Land of Enchantment seem so hell-bent on breaking the spell?

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